

Community Voices

PUBLIC PROCESS

The formal process of updating the East Mountain Area Plan was prompted in June 2003 by Bernalillo County Commissioner Michael Brasher in response to resident concerns. Since that time, East Mountain Area residents have shown their dedicated participation in the process. Residents were involved with the community survey, volunteer committee activities, and participation in public meetings.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

East Mountain Area Plan meetings, hosted by Commissioner Brasher, were held nearly every month, for a year, to allow discussion about the plan and relevant issues. The meetings were announced in the local newspaper, on flyers posted in key community buildings, by local civic groups, and in neighborhood associations. (See Appendix C for a list of community meetings)

CITIZEN COMMITTEE

As the process to update the EMAP moved forward, Commissioner Brasher requested input for the plan from the residents. This encouraged the formation of a volunteer *Citizen Committee* made up of a number of *subcommittees* to solicit and organize input.

Residents joined subcommittees to divide the tasks of reviewing the East Mountain Area Plan (1992) and generating input. Each subcommittee was chaired by a volunteer who facilitated meetings and recorded input into a document to be submitted to the Bernalillo County Planning Department. The subcommittees included the following:

- Goals and Objectives – Review and suggest Goals and Objectives
- Environmental - Make recommendations concerning protection of the East Mountain environment.
- Rural Character - Define rural character for the East Mountain Area and suggested methods to protect those characteristics from the impacts of future growth
- Area Plan – Review policies and implementing actions; suggest changes
- Questionnaire – Assist in preparing survey; solicit and organize input

From the inception of this planning process through the request for approval, this document has benefited from hundreds of volunteer hours and dozens of residents. They have clearly shown their commitment to planning in their communities.

COMMUNITY SURVEY

A Citizen Questionnaire was previously conducted in 1973 when the first East Mountain Area Plan was written and again in 1991 when the East Mountain Area Plan (EMAP) was updated.

The purpose of the current Quality of Life Survey was to question East Mountain Area community members on the perceived quality of life in the East Mountains. The Quality of Life Survey, also referred to as the Questionnaire, consisted of 29 mostly qualitative questions prepared by County Staff and a citizen subcommittee, covering the areas of demographics, utility resources, commercial development, land use and community amenities. Some of the same questions were asked in the most recent Questionnaire as were posed in the 1992 Questionnaire, with the intention that changes in the community could be identified. Not all respondents answered every question. Many of the questions had a multiple-answer option. In addition to answering the questions, respondents included written comments to most of the questions. Due to the qualitative nature of the questions, the Survey Report reflects the visions and values of the community more than providing quantitative support for the technical aspect of the EMAP.

Over 1000 copies of the Survey were distributed to area residents, landowners, and business people. Volunteer residents participated in distributing the Survey. The Survey was printed in two East Mountain area newspapers. The distribution and return of the Questionnaire was staggered. The first deadline was stated as November 1 and a second deadline as November 30, but the Questionnaires were accepted until December. Most responses came from the North 14 and Cedar Crest region; North 14 and Frost Road region; Paa-Ko; and La Madera region. A total of 732 completed Questionnaires were returned and tabulated and included in the Survey Results. Resident volunteers helped with inputting and evaluating the data.

(See Appendix F for full survey results)

COMMUNITY ISSUES

The citizens have many concerns about the current state of the East Mountain Area as well as the future outlook. While all residents appreciate the unique beauty offered by the East Mountains, there are differing views on the amenities and resources needed to maintain and improve life in the East Mountain Area.

The following items — which outline the primary concerns and majority opinions of 2003 survey respondents — offer a general guide for planning and policy decisions.

The 2003 survey respondents named the following reasons for living in the EMA:

1. Rural character
2. Privacy and solitude
3. Open space and scenic appeal
4. Escape from noise/light/air pollution
5. Escape from urban pressures

Regarding EMA current issues, respondents replied as follows:

- Eighty-two (82) percent said further residential development should either be limited or continued but controlled.
- Eighty-three (83) percent said more shopping centers and strip malls would damage the EMA.
- Seventy-eight (78) percent opposed a city/county merger.

When asked what the biggest problems were, respondents frequently cited the following:

- Development, too many subdivisions
- Uncontrolled growth, urbanization
- Erosion of rural character
- Campbell Ranch
- Over population

The three most important issues respondents named were:

1. Retention of rural character
2. Wildfire
3. Forest health & environment.

Although water issues and development did not rank high on the scale of most important issues, this is contrasted by the repeated references to these issues in response to other questions and comments in the questionnaire. By far, the most critical issues identified throughout the entire questionnaire were water availability and control of residential and commercial development.

RURAL CHARACTER

The most important issue identified by respondents on the 2003 questionnaire was the retention of rural character, confirmed by responses to other Survey questions. The vision of the East Mountain Area residents is to maintain this rural character. This is the focus of discussion in the Community Vision section below. Rural character is defined by natural landscape, open spaces, undisturbed ecosystems, quietness, views of the landscape and the sky, limited traffic, large lots, privacy, and small-scale local businesses.

WATER RESOURCES

The most important issues identified in the 1991 questionnaire were water and waste water problems. This concern for water had drastically increased since the 1973 questionnaire. Water continues to be a concern to the overall community. Concern for the limited water supply was evident in responses to almost every question asked. The availability and accessibility of water impact the residents' attitudes about the kind of development that should be allowed. This was evident through comments made in the questionnaire. For example, although many people welcome a community pool in the area, many others believe that a pool is not appropriate in a rural area that has limited water availability.

The 2003 survey revealed that over half (383) of residents responding get their water from individual wells; 43.2 percent get their water from community-based systems or professionally managed water co-ops. Respondents report having problems with water quality and water quantity more than problems with distribution of water, water cost, or system management. Very few respondents (4.3 percent) report waste water system problems, and most (81.3 percent) are familiar with alternative waste water systems.

Over 61 percent of respondents in 1973 said they would not join a community sewage disposal system. In 1991, 52 percent said they would participate. In 2003, 47 percent of survey respondents said they would not be interested in connecting to a regional water supply and/or sewer system if one becomes available in their area.

RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

Respondents stated that they moved to the East Mountain Area for the rural character, privacy, solitude, open space, scenic appeal, and escape from noise/light/air pollution. Clearly, the rural character of the area is highly valued by residents and attractive to outsiders. Ironically, the residents who are attracted to rural communities can endanger the very quality that attracts them.

The 2003 Community Survey results indicate that most respondents (82.6 percent) believe that residential development should be limited or continued but controlled; only 3.2 percent believe residential development should be encouraged. Respondents would like to see a minimum lot size in the East Mountain Area of 2-5 acres.

Concerns regarding mobile home usage and location have been prevalent over the years. In 1973, approximately 50 percent of the respondents favored confining them to specially zoned lots. The 1991 survey respondents favored this choice by 73 percent. In 1973, about 38 percent said mobile homes should be allowed to be located in any residentially located lots. In 1991, only 14 percent agreed. This question was not addressed in the 2003 Survey.

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The 1973, 1991, and 2003 surveys asked the question “Where should businesses be located?” In 1973, 38.3 percent of the responses indicated that commercial activities should be located only at highway intersections. In 1991, that percentage dropped to 14 percent. 64.6 percent of respondents of the 2003 survey, favored designated commercial centers as preferred locations for commercial activities.

In the current survey, a slight majority (56.1 percent) of respondents believe that the East Mountain Area does not need new businesses. Whereas, 45.1 percent believe businesses are needed. 83 percent of respondents are not in favor of putting new businesses in strip malls or in shopping centers and strongly believe that more shopping centers and strip malls would damage the quality of life rather than improve it. If new businesses are introduced to the East Mountain Area, questionnaire respondents prefer small locally owned businesses, cafes, crafts shops, and galleries to large stores, restaurants, home-based businesses, and tourist trade. Respondents favor putting new businesses in existing commercially zoned areas, in Albuquerque and Edgewood, and in established villages and population centers.

COMMUNITY VISION

The following language was taken directly from the community steering committee’s comments and written input.

A majority of survey respondents cited preservation of rural character as a primary concern. Survey respondents clearly recognized the difference between rural and urban/suburban character. However, past EMA plans have not clearly described what the term *rural character* means. Some decision-makers have cited this failure as hampering efforts to protect EMA rurality from inappropriate development, commercialization, suburban encroachment, and other pressures.

A plan that properly defines and specifies what rural characteristics are can, in turn, enable policies and legal decisions that better protect against rural degradation. Nationwide, planning literature is filled with comments about the elusiveness of the term, *rural character*. The 2003 EMA survey —Question 23:*What do you like best about the EMA?* — offers language, concepts, and preferences by which we might describe EMA rurality.

A 2003 survey synopsis describes EMA rural character as a remote, isolated, secluded area with few people, low-population density, and where residents have no close neighbors. In a rural area, a healthy, natural ecosystem dominates the landscape, and development is limited and not easily seen from most roadways. Home sites are most often purchased and built individually by various local builders rather than mass produced in tract developments built by a single, large enterprise; however, vacant parcels may have been divided into large lots (two- to five-acre minimum) prior to sale to individual homeowners.

Note that the carrying capacity of a rural area is a fraction of that of suburbia. Although, cities and suburbs might wisely increase and concentrate human populations, a rural area ceases to exist when it exceeds its capacity. The true value of a rural area lies — not in county revenues — but in quality of life, which cannot and must not be assessed by monetary value.

The following bullet points list rural features, qualities, and characteristics cited in the 2003 community survey that EMA policies, plans, and decisions should specifically protect. Other characteristics may be identified in the future.

- **Undisturbed and protected views.** *A rural area has “wide, open spaces between houses”. It lacks commercial signs and billboards.*
- **A nature-dominated landscape.** *Instead of artificial structures, natural flora and fauna dominate; rurality has and values its abundant unspoiled scenery, wildlife, wildflowers, birds, coyotes, woods, trees, undeveloped meadows — a place where residents can follow seasonal change in a predominantly natural landscape.*
- **A quiet and private life.** *A rural area is quiet. It has and enforces noise and light ordinances. It exists without congestion and life unfolds at a “slower pace”. Rural life offers privacy, peace, tranquility, and solitude; is serene, has “breathing room” and “room to roam”. It enables individual residents “to be left alone” — to enjoy a natural sights and sounds along with a “relaxed pace”. A rural area protects dark night skies. Rural lots are large (two- to five-acres minimum), and roads are often unpaved.*
- **A safe and uncongested area.** *A rural place “is not Albuquerque”; it’s “not the city”; it’s” not urban”. It has less traffic and crime than suburban areas. It is protected against residential and commercial development that would encourage more traffic and crime.*
- **Clear air, safe water.** *A rural area protects water quality and quantity for existing residents first. For the existing population, it protects against residential and commercial development that would compromise the water supply and air quality.*
- **Relative lack of commercial development.** *Commercial development is limited to nonfranchized, small, locally owned businesses in existing commercial zones, with commercial sites restricted to major highway intersections, and new commercial zones discouraged. On a case-by-case basis and only with full citizen participation, commercial expansion might be considered within existing commercial zones at major intersections.*

STAYING INVOLVED

Neighborhood and Landowner Associations

Neighborhood and Landowner Associations once the providence of urban living, have proliferated in the East Mountain Area. They vary widely in organization and intent but have in common a desire to provide a mechanism to promote, improve and protect the quality of life of their members.

Associations are registered and recognized by Bernalillo County Zoning, Building, and Planning Department when application is made and bylaws submitted. Pertinent information then flows to each Association via designated officers. Associations are notified and comments requested for any proposed changes impacting their immediate area. County Sheriff and Fire Departments work closely with the Association network to further enhance the safety coverage of the East Mountains.